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PROGRAM First Line Report STATION WTOP Radio  
CBS Network

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SUBJECT Discovery

JUDY MULLER: The exact launch time is a secret. The exact payload is a secret. And for the first time in two decades of American manned space flight, all conversations between the astronauts and mission controllers will be a secret. It is the first fully classified manned space flight in the history of NASA. So, of course, it's what everyone is talking about.

More about the not-so-secret secret after this.

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MULLER: Sometime today, the shuttle Discovery will blast off from the Kennedy Space Center with a secret military payload. But as CBS news Pentagon correspondent Bill Lynch points out, it's not all that secret.

BILL LYNCH: What is in the big payload bay on the shuttle is an inertial upper-stage solid-fuel rocket. And attached to the other end of that is a 5000-pound signals intelligence satellite which will be deployed by the shuttle, and then fired into a geo-stationary orbit some 22,300 miles above the Soviet Union, we believe. And the principal purpose of this giant ear-in-space is to pick up very discrete signals intelligence from the Soviet Union, some of their most sensitive communications.

MULLER: Since we know that and the Soviets know that, why is this mission still shrouded in secrecy? What is there to gain from the secrecy around the mission?

LYNCH: It's only possible to surmise that the Pentagon, and Caspar Weinberger and the Air Force, is trying to make it as

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possible for the Soviet Union to figure out exactly what's going on. The cat, however, has been out of the bag for many months. And it's difficult to imagine that they're successfully trying to close the barn door at this stage.

MULLER: Lynch says his sources suggest that the Soviets don't know all the capabilities of this spy satellite as yet.

LYNCH: John Pike, who's a scientist with the Federation of American Scientists, and a very close student of these intelligence hardware matters, says that the antenna alone on this 5000-pound satellite, 2 1/2 tons -- that's about 50 percent larger than previous sigint satellites -- is as big as a baseball diamond, and that it can focus in on an area the size of a university campus, an industrial park, and literally suck up all electronic communications with strengths above that of a flashlight battery. And he says that, theoretically, it can discern what somebody is putting into a computer keyboard from 22,000 miles away.

MULLER: Discovery will stay in orbit until Tuesday, at least. But the landing time is -- you guessed it -- a secret.